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THE
CLASS-MEETING.

In Twenty Short Chapters.

BY
O. P. FITZGERALD, D.D.

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PREFACE.

I BELIEVE and therefore speak. As a fire in my bones have been the thoughts given in these short chapters. They are offered to the Methodist public in the hope and with the prayer that they may do good. Believing that Methodists cannot afford to give up the Class-meeting, that it can be made even more effective as a means of grace than ever before, and that it is the duty of all to help in this good work, I have prayerfully made this humble contribution to a subject that claims the candid consideration of all Methodist people. The book might have been made larger, but the form and method adopted were thought to be best for the practical end aimed at. That end is to aid in bringing about the Class-meeting Revival, the need of which is felt by so many earnest souls throughout the Methodist world, and the signs of whose coming are visible to some.

THE AUTHOR.

NASHVILLE, TENN., April, 1880.

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GOD'S METHOD.

IT pleases God to bless his children on the earth by making them instruments in blessing one another. It is his plan to work mainly through intermediate agency and instrumentality. This principle pervades the whole system of the divine government. Ever and anon God "makes bare his arm," making his power to be felt directly in the great crises of the world's history. But in his infinite wisdom he sees that it is best, as a rule, to work mediately rather than immediately. He educates the human race by making it self-helpful. He does nothing for it which it can do for itself. Placing adequate resources within their reach, he leaves mankind to use them for the development of their faculties, the formation of their characters, and the attainment of happiness. All the elements of a high civilization are latent in the constitution of the earth. But God has made no direct revelation of the laws of

art, or of the principles and facts of science. He wrote with his own fingers the law upon the tables of stone, but neither painting, statue, nor edifice, was ever fashioned directly by the divine hand. Bezaleel had the spirit of wisdom as an artificer only as a quickening influence, as multitudes have had it whose souls were responsive to the touches of God's Spirit. Art, science, and civilization, were in the purpose of God concerning the world. In a true sense, he is the Archetype of all art, the Pioneer of all science, the Source of all civilization. But not by direct exercise of the divine energy does he bless and adorn human life, and promote human progress. The God-man, Jesus Christ, made no direct contribution to the sum of human knowledge in this sphere. In him were all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and he might have anticipated, in a single treatise, all the discoveries of modern science. But this was not according to the purpose of God to make the human race self-educative and self-advancing. Man must work out his own destiny. He must climb the ladder of progress round by round, and, as he as-

cends, gain strength by the exertion, and be rewarded for his toil by the subjective benefits of the struggle. Doing nothing for man which he can do for himself, God puts him into a world where he finds all things made ready to satisfy his inquisitive mind, and to develop the skill of his cunning hand. So, in subduing the earth, the race educates itself.

This law holds good with reference to the spiritual development of mankind. God does nothing for us in this sphere directly which we are able to do for ourselves, and for one another. He has committed the gospel to the ministry, not of angels, but of men. It has pleased him, by the foolishness of preaching, to save them that believe. He has made it our duty and privilege to pray for each other, putting intercessory prayer on the same basis with prayer for ourselves. He has ordained that every recipient of his grace shall be also a dispenser of it; that every one who professes Christ shall also confess him before men. The supernatural forces of the gospel are to be employed by, and act through, human agency. The world is to

be converted only so fast as willing workers can do it. Men and women are God's agents to bring the world to Christ. They are Christ's witnesses. They are to tell the good news of the gospel. It must go from lip to lip, and from heart to heart, until the glad sound shall be heard in all the earth, and

One song employ all nations.
The dwellers in the vales and on the rocks
Shall shout to each other, and mountain-tops
From distant mountains catch the flying joy,
Till, nation after nation taught the strain,
Earth rolls the rapturous hosanna round.

In this method is the wisdom of God. Within and without man are the resources which God has placed at his command for working out his own salvation. In this sphere, as in that of the natural or material, God will do nothing for man which man can do for himself. The reasons are the same, based on the same principles, the expression of the same ineffable wisdom and goodness. In making the spread of the gospel dependent on human agency, God shows his recognition of the fact that in this way only can the followers of Christ live his

life, shine in his light, and wear his likeness. In teaching, praying for, and persuading the world to come to Christ, believers find the aliment that nourishes their own souls. In such service the blessed Head of the Church develops its noblest life, clothes it in its divinest beauty, and lifts it up to the high plane where holy men and women walk with him in white.

THE SOCIAL INSTINCT.

THE moral nature is a unit. The affections are correlated, and their reciprocal influence is one of the marvels of Infinite Wisdom and Goodness. There is no proper place for monasticism or asceticism in the Bible, or in healthy human nature. Neither in the Old Testament nor the New is there the slightest hint that the human soul is to find its perfection in isolation from its kind. The monastic system had its temporary uses, and has left some names that the world will not let die—flowers that bloomed in a desert. But it is abnormal, and, having no root in human nature, and no warrant from the word of the Lord, it must pass away. It has made a record in which are mingled the light of exceptional heroism and saintliness, and the shadows of human weakness and sin. The monks were exposed to temptations that could not be resisted in the midst of conditions that cut them off from the best human

helps, and at the same time exposed them to the perils that must always attend any departure from any ordinance of God, whether written in his word or in the nature of man. The system, though dying, yet lingers; but it is doomed, and the experiment will not be made again. The Christianity of the cloister will live only in history and poetry. The Christianity of the future is that which, following its Master, goes about doing good, carrying its light into all the dark places of the earth, and, instead of nursing its own reveries in solitude, carries the knowledge of the risen Jesus and the love of God into all human homes, and to every beating, aching, yearning, human heart.

In the absence of the social relations which God has ordained and blessed, the true and perfect development of religious character is impossible. The discipline of the family on earth is preparatory to the joys of the family above. The culture of Christian friendship and the interchange of Christian affection here are the basis and preparation for the fellowship of the saints in glory. The whole family in earth and heaven are one—

One family we dwell in Him,
One Church above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream, of death.

The interblending of human and divine love is one of the wonders and mysteries of the grace of God. Where the one ends and the other begins no one can tell. The human affections are not only used in the Holy Scriptures to type the divine, but are in actual experience made the channel for its communication.

"I like to hear your songs; their melody enchants me; and your rejoicings around the altar give me pleasure; but it is human excitement, sympathetic emotion," said a thoughtful and skeptical physician, who stood gazing upon the exercises in the altar one night during a camp-meeting in California.

"You are right, doctor," was the reply. "It is human sympathy—and it is more: it is both human and divine. It pleases God to make the one a channel for the other. In this way souls are converted. Thought kindles thought, heart responds to heart, and

the blessed Spirit of the Lord enters the soul, made receptive and responsive by the excitation of those elements of human nature which are as much the work of God as the creation of the soul, and which are correlated in their nature and action to man's whole being and destiny."

He looked at me keenly for a few moments, and, pressing my hand warmly, said:

"I thank you, sir; I believe I have caught a new idea."

And he had. This view of the matter tided him over a difficulty that had perplexed him, and has perplexed thousands of others who overlook the facts that man's moral nature is a unit, and that what we call the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, are not two systems, but one. It was a turning-point in the destiny of a soul. From that hour this man's grasp upon heavenly things grew stronger and stronger, until the sublime and blessed verities of the Christian faith became the sweetness and joy of his life.

The social instinct, regarded in the light of these suggestions, is seen to be not merely

the regulator of human relationships, and the instrument of earthly pleasure, but the channel through which the heavenly life flows down into the receptive soul. The same chords that respond to human sympathy and affection vibrate also to the thrilling touch of the Spirit of God.

THE BIBLE TEACHING.

THE Bible teaching on this subject accords with the principles glanced at in the previous chapters. This is what we might expect. The Bible and human nature have the same Author. Nothing is plainer than that. God deals with men as social beings as regards both their duties and devotions. Social prayer is as explicitly enjoined as secret prayer. It is scarcely less needed. Prayer that is always subjective covers only a part of the objects that should be embraced in a Christian man's petitions to the throne of grace. That sort of prayer is necessary to the development of one side of the Christian life, and cannot be omitted. There is another side which is developed by social prayer, and this cannot be dispensed with except at the expense of loss and one-sidedness in the religious life. The instinct of the soul harmonizes with the word of God. In all false religions this instinct expresses

itself in some form or other. In the Old Testament scriptures both social and public worship are enjoined, and regulated by specific commands and a prescribed ritual. The worship of the Mosaic ritual was not intended merely to maintain the knowledge of the true God, and to save Israel from idolatry, but it was designed also to meet an imperative need and craving of the human soul. By this worship patriotic fervor was kindled and maintained, the unity of the national life conserved, and the social nature of the people kept wholesome and sweet. It was a characteristic of the remnant of those who retained the true faith in the days of the nation's decline, that they met for social religious converse and fellowship. "*Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.*" Driven from the temple by the corruptions that were prevalent, cut off from the usual means of public worship, in obedience to the divine command and the impulses of their natures they sought the fellowship of kindred minds and the comfort of religious communion. The precise nature of these religious conversational meet-

ings is not stated, but they were clearly social and devotional. They spoke to each other, and their words were of such a character as to be found worthy of record, not only in the memories of the participants, but in the eternal records in which the Lord himself perpetuates the testimonies of the faithful ones who confess him when the multitude deny him, and who draw closer to him and one another when the crowd forsake or threaten. These meetings had all the essential elements of the Class-meeting, as conducted by Methodists. They that feared the Lord and thought upon his name were those who meditated upon God and heavenly things, and whose lives were conformed to his will, and brought into vital contact and union with him. To think upon the name of the Lord is to have his image before the mind, and to dwell adoringly and gratefully upon his attributes, as revealed in his word, exhibited in his providence, and disclosed to the believing heart by the Holy Spirit. The name of God is in this sense God himself. Their view of God and their relation to him was the basis and bond of

their union with each other. They held to the same principles, they recognized the same obligations, and they were thus prepared to sympathize with, comfort, strengthen, and encourage one another, in their devotions and duties, their trials and sorrows.

NEW TESTAMENT PRACTICE.

THIS recognition of the social element in religion pervades the New Testament. The Master taught and trained "the twelve" together. In this way, doubtless, while the individuality of each one was not destroyed, it was happily modified—these chosen men reacting on one another. Thus each learned from all, and each became a mirror in which his fellow-disciples could see an example to be followed, or faults to be shunned. So with "the seventy," and so with the Church as it came from the molding hands of the apostles, warm and plastic with the life of God, and breathing the breath of heaven. The idea of solitary Christian living is not hinted at in the New Testament. It never could have been entertained for a moment until the Church had lost the spirit of its Head, who came to make men brothers. Paul and Peter, and James and John, looked upon the Church as a family, and in their

teachings employed all appropriate figures of speech to illustrate this relation. The Love-feast and the Class-meeting, in their essential characteristics, were means of grace employed by the apostles and their fellow-Christians. In their assemblies the very exercises which constitute a Methodist Class-meeting were held. In these meetings prayer and song, exhortation and teaching, called forth the gifts of the believers for the profit of all. (Read the twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. See 1 Corinthians i. 6.) Mark the whole spirit and practice of the early Church. The false and freezing notion that only preachers can testify for Christ was the birth of a later and more corrupt period. It was the apostolic command that Christians should comfort and edify one another; and they did it. (See 1 Thess. v. 11.) This scripture is conclusive as to the point in hand. The members of the Church were to do this mutual service for one another. Their spiritual father and minister was absent, carrying the gospel to others, planting new Churches, and forming new centers of gospel light and power. The

members of the Church edified one another. They did not plead alleged pastoral oversight or neglect as an excuse for the neglect of every Christian duty. More than once during my ministerial life have I known Church-societies, strong in numbers, almost disintegrate from the temporary loss of a pastor. These people call themselves soldiers of Jesus Christ! They belong to the army of the Lord! A million of such would not conquer a village for Christ in a million of years. Where did they get such a conception of the duties of Christian discipleship? What sort of a conversion did they undergo? Where are their Bibles? Who are their religious instructors? The writer served temporarily a Baptist Church in San Francisco, whose members, in the absence of a pastor, kept up during several months all the social meetings of the Church, without any flagging of zeal or loss of interest. They followed the New Testament, and from it they had learned what were the privileges and duties of the living members of Christ's living Church.

The right view and the right practice were recovered by Methodists under the lead of

John Wesley and his associates and successors. The Church recovered its lost freedom and regained its lost power. The seal of silence was broken in its assemblies. The living stream of renewed spiritual life broke forth in the desert, and the wilderness blossomed as the rose. It was a resurrection. It was a resurrection of a buried gift; and the living, glowing, growing, rejoicing, witnessing Church, sprang into life, and New Testament Christianity again walked the earth in its original beauty, and wrought its wonders as at the first.

The Methodists did not originate the Class-meeting. They only revived it. It was born with the Christian Church. It was born of the instincts, necessities, and aspirations of human nature, hungering for heavenly truth and holy human fellowship. The Methodists gave it a name, but the thing itself was the inevitable revival of an apostolic institution when a mighty work of God had brought back again the essential doctrine, polity, and usages, of the uncorrupted Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was not an invention, but the normal outgrowth of a living

Christianity. Its elements were in the conditions developed by the great revival, and they crystallized into the form it took by the operation of the law that New Testament Christianity will and must express itself in New Testament forms. The recovery of the primitive spirit brought with it the recovery of the primitive usages of the Church of Christ.

PREPARATORY.

“SIR, you wish to serve God and go to heaven; remember you cannot serve him alone; you must therefore *find* companions, or *make* them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.”

These words, spoken to John Wesley just before his return to the University of Oxford, in 1729, helped to give direction to his life. Arriving at Oxford, he joined the “Holy Club,” and at once became its leading spirit. It consisted of only four members—John Wesley, Charles Wesley, Mr. Morgan, the son of an Irish gentleman, and Mr. Kirkham, of Merton College. Here was the germ of the Class-meeting. They spent three or four evenings each week in reading together the Greek Testament and the ancient classics. Their Sundays were devoted specially to the study of divinity. They visited the prisons and the sick. The Club increased in numbers, and its labors

and devotions were systematized. In 1735 Whitefield joined them. The name "Methodists" had already been applied to them, suggested by their methodical habits. They lived by rule. "They built me up," says Whitefield, "in the knowledge and fear of God, and taught me to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." The great preacher fell into the error of becoming a "Quietist" for a time, absented himself from the meetings of the Club, taking instead solitary walks into the fields, and praying silently and alone. But his healthy religious nature soon reacted. "God gave me, blessed be his holy name! a teachable temper, and I was delivered from those wiles of Satan." John Wesley himself had great perplexities and mental trials from reading the mystic writers who substituted reveries for duties, and self-analysis and introspection for the social religious labors and enjoyments. They so construed the first and great commandment as to exclude the second, which is like unto it. Mr. Wesley tells its effect upon himself. The morbid and unscriptural view these writers present of union with

God and internal religion made every thing else appear to him mean and insipid. "But they made good works appear so too; yea, and faith itself, and what not? They gave me an entire new view of religion, nothing like any I had before. But, alas! it was nothing like that religion which Christ and his apostles taught. I had a plenary dispensation from all the commands of God. The form was thus: Love is all; all the commands besides are only means of love; you must choose those which you feel are means to you, and use them as long as they are so. Thus were all the bonds burst at once; and though I never could fully come into this, nor contentedly omit what God enjoined, yet, I know not how, I fluctuated between obedience and disobedience. I had no heart, no vigor, no zeal in obeying; continually doubting whether I was right or wrong, and never out of perplexities or entanglements. Nor can I at this hour give a distinct account how or when I came a little back toward the right way; only my present sense is this—all the other enemies of Christianity are triflers; the Mystics are the most dan-

gerous; they stab it in the vitals; and its most serious professors are most likely to fall by them."

This is strong language, but it is true. Nothing more surely and completely kills Christianity than to isolate it. Imprison it selfishly in the heart, and it dies for lack of air and sunlight.

Years before Mr. Wesley had felt his want of harmony with God, and asked himself, Could it be attained? and, if attained, could it fail to be a matter of consciousness? These questions found a happy answer in his experience on Wednesday, May 24, 1738. About five o'clock on that morning he opened his Testament on these words: "*There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature.*" (2 Peter i. 4.) Just as he went out he opened it again on the passage, "*Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.*" In the evening of the same day he went reluctantly to a society in Aldersgate street, where a layman was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while listening to Luther's descrip

tion of the change which the Holy Spirit works in the heart, through faith in Christ, the great and blessed change took place. Mr. Wesley tells it thus:

I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ—Christ alone—for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, "This cannot be faith, for where is thy joy?" Then I was taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy which usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of his own will. After my return home I was much buffeted with temptations, but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again; I as often lifted up my eyes, and He sent me help from my holy place. And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting, with all my might, under the law as well as under grace. But *then* I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; *now* I was always conqueror.

This experience, realized when he was thirty-five years old, after long and painful struggle, prepared the founder of Method-

ism to lead in the development of means of grace in which converted men and women bore testimony to the new birth and to the witness of the Spirit, and edified one another in love.

BIRTH OF THE METHODIST CLASS-MEETING.

THE Class-meeting was not planned or devised. It was a providential birth. It was not the work of man, but of God. It originated in a pecuniary scheme.

Mr. Wesley was talking with the members of the Society in Bristol concerning the payment of some chapel-debts, when one rose and said:

“Let every member of the Society give a penny a week until all are paid.”

“But,” it was answered, “many of them are poor, and cannot afford it.”

“Then,” said the first speaker, “put eleven of the poorest with me, and if they can give any thing, well; I will call on them weekly, and if they can give nothing, I will give for them as well as for myself. And each of you call on eleven of your neighbors weekly, receive what they give, and make up what is wanting.”

Birth of the Methodist Class-meeting. 33

The suggestion was adopted. In a little while some of the leaders informed Mr. Wesley that they found members who did not live as they should.

“It struck me immediately,” said Mr. Wesley, “this is the thing, the very thing, we have wanted so long.”

He called together all the leaders, and requested each one to make particular inquiry into the conduct of those he saw weekly. This was done, and many members were found to be walking disorderly. Some of these were reclaimed, and others were expelled.

In London and other places the same method was used, and with like results. Unworthy persons were detected and re-proved. “If they forsook their evil ways, they were retained gladly; if they obstinately persisted, it was openly declared that they were not of us. The rest mourned and prayed for them, and yet rejoiced that, as far as in us lay, the scandal was rolled away from the Society.”

It was made the duty of a leader (1) to see each person in his Class once a week, at

34 *Birth of the Methodist Class-meeting.*

the least, in order to inquire respecting his spiritual condition; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require; and to receive what he is willing to give toward the relief of the poor and the support of the gospel. (2) To meet the minister and the stewards of the Society, in order to report to the former any that are sick, or any that are disorderly and will not be reproved, and to pay the stewards what they have received from their several classes in the week preceding.

Each person was visited at his own house at first, but for many reasons this was soon found to be impracticable, and was discontinued. Therefore it was agreed that the members of each class should meet together, and thus more satisfactory inquiry was made concerning the experience of each one. Mr. Wesley thus speaks of the results:

It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to "bear one another's burdens," and naturally to "care for each other." As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with,

Birth of the Methodist Class-meeting. 35

so they had a more endeared affection for, each other. And, *speaking the truth in love, they grew up into him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ; from whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, increased unto the edifying itself in love.*

Borrowing a usage from the ancient Church, Mr. Wesley issued tickets to the members in the shape of small cards bearing pointed texts of Scripture. These tickets were dated, inscribed with the name of the bearer, and renewed quarterly. They often bore a symbolical engraving of some sort—a Bible encircled by a halo; a guardian angel; an anchor, etc. The ticket was practically his certificate of membership in the Society, and answered all the purposes, in cases of removal, of the commendatory letters mentioned by the Apostle Paul.

This was the origin of the Methodist Class-meeting, and it was evidently the work of God—one of those instances in which he brings forth the greatest results from the most unexpected and apparently insignificant causes. The spark kindled by the unknown man at Bristol, who suggested a

36 *Birth of the Methodist Class-meeting.*

penny a week for the payment of chapel-debts, has made a blaze that has illuminated whole continents and the isles of the sea. This light is now being rekindled, and its beams will shine more brightly, and extend farther, than at the first. God of our fathers, grant that it may be so !

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CLASS-MEETING.

A NURSE was at hand to cherish the institution whose birth was recorded in the last chapter. That nurse was John Wesley. We have already seen how God had schooled him for such a work.

The weekly contribution was continued after the chapel-debts were paid. At first they were paid by the Class-leaders to the stewards for the poor. Soon the lay ministry arose under the Methodist movement, and the Class-meeting became the source of their support. The "penny a week and shilling a quarter" worked wonders, making a system of Church-finance never surpassed in simplicity and effectiveness.

As a means of moral discipline for the Church, the Class-meeting wrought incalculable benefits. The Class-leaders, as sub-pastors (for this was their function), were appointed by the pastors, made weekly exami-

38 *Development of the Class-meeting.*

nation of the members of the Societies, and at first reported the result once a week, afterward only monthly. Such discipline had not been since the apostolic age. The Class-meeting was a providential necessity. The simple terms of admission into the Methodist Societies drew into them during the great religious awakening a vast multitude of men and women who needed its inspection, nurture, and instruction.

The pastors of the Methodist Societies (with Mr. Wesley "Society" and "Church" were interchangeable terms) were, from the very necessity of the great religious movement, constantly going from place to place. Many of them hardly stopped as much as a whole day in any one place. Direct pastoral oversight and care of the Societies was not possible. The Class-leaders took this work, and by their service the fruits of the pastors' labors were happily conserved, and the world saw in operation a system combining at once the most efficient evangelization and the most thorough moral discipline.

The Band-meeting was introduced as a supplement to the Class-meeting. Its start

ing-point was also Bristol. It grew out of a desire on the part of many persons of a means of closer communion. They wished to enjoy the benefits of Christian fellowship without reserve. "They were," says Mr. Wesley, "the more desirous of this when they observed that it was the express advice of an inspired writer: '*Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.*'" He divided them into smaller companies, putting the married or single men, and the married or single women, together.

The Band-meeting pledge was: "To confess our faults one to another, and pray one for another, that we may be healed, we intend—1. To meet once a week, at the least. 2. To come punctually at the hour appointed. 3. To begin with singing or prayer. 4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, the temptations we have felt since our last meeting. 5. To desire some person among us (thence called a leader) to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest,

in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations."

Mr. Wesley desired all the male bands to meet him or his preacher every Wednesday evening, and the women on Sunday, that they might receive such special instructions and exhortations as might be needful for them; that special prayers might be offered as their cases demanded, and thanksgiving given for mercies received.

The Band-meeting was never enjoined in the General Rules. The Class-meeting adopted some of its features, and finally superseded it.

These rules of the Band-meeting throw a blaze of light upon the Methodism of that day. How intense was the feeling that thus found expression! How strong and absorbing the religious purpose! The great revival was at its white heat when these rules were adopted, and we need not wonder that in contact with such a spirit formalism and worldliness were swept aside as by the breath of the Lord.

It is not claiming too much to say that to

the Class-meeting Methodism was indebted more than to any other agency for the vigor of its discipline, the purity of its membership, and the permanence of its acquisitions. It was at once a means of grace and a test of sincerity. It made every Class-leader a drill-sergeant in the army of the Lord. By it the Church recovered its lost gift of utterance, and where surpliced State stipendiaries had mumbled printed prayers to sleeping auditors, or empty benches, the voices of tens of thousands of men and women, rejoicing in the liberty wherewith they had been made free, were heard telling the wonderful things of God. As in apostolic days, believers exhorted, comforted, and edified one another. It was a resurrection of apostolic power and the restoration of apostolic usages.

RIGHT ARM OF METHODISM.

FOR more than a hundred years the Class-meeting was the right arm of Methodism. It conserved the fruits of its continuous revivals, leaving the mighty men of God who traveled and preached untrammelled in their ministry, and allowing them to go to the regions beyond at the shortest call from the captains of the itinerant host. In the Class-room was first exercised and recognized the gifts of young men who became exhorters, Class-leaders in their turn, and preachers of the word. Every Methodist Society was an army in the field and in training for the conquest of the world. It was, to all practical intents and purposes, a theological seminary. In it the young convert learned the doctrines of Methodism in concrete form. They were inwrought into the very warp and woof of his spiritual life. In the Class-meeting, the young man who was looking to the ministry was led to think

more of the practical questions that bear directly upon the spiritual life than of speculative points in theology, or difficulties in exegesis, and when he entered the pulpit he was able to point his hearers in a straight line to the cross, and to tell with confidence and with convincing power what he had seen and felt. Should not every Methodist school in the land have its Class-meeting, and especially those with theological departments proper? It would be a strong defense against rationalistic error and nebulous theology in general. Agnostic nonsense could have no show of respect or tolerance in a warm Methodist Class-meeting. It withers and dies in the blaze of a genuine experience of the presence and power of the Holy Ghost.

The Class-meeting furnished a test of sincerity of special value to the Church during this period of rapid growth. The methods of our fathers were those of the apostles. They cast their nets into the sea, and drew to land good and bad. The condition of admission into their Societies was a desire to flee the wrath to come and lead a new life. The Class-meeting very soon tested the

quality of these recruits, and the sincerity of their expressed desire and avowed motive in seeking such relationship. The earnest ones found in it just what they wanted. The half-hearted and carnally-minded found in it just what they did not want and could not endure. Before the six-months' probation was out the faithful were confirmed and the unworthy were gotten rid of. This was Methodist "confirmation;" and most satisfactory it was. It was of the nature of that referred to by a good old black Methodist woman whom a Protestant Episcopal Bishop proposed to take into his Church with the rite of confirmation:

"Why, bless your soul, honey, *I'se already been confirmed a hundred times!*"

She was doubtless a Class-meeting Methodist.

The weekly inspection and stimulus of the Class-meeting more than any other one agency gave Methodism its purity and its power. It made a distinct line of separation between the Church and the world. It filled the ranks with true soldiers of Jesus Christ, and trained them for service by the most efficient

methods. At the same time it stripped the uniform of Christianity from those who would dishonor or betray it. Never since the days of the apostles was there such effective moral discipline, and never did the Church exhibit such power or make such progress. The Class-meeting, under God, was thus at once a source of aggressive energy in the Church and the conservator of its enormous gains.

WEAKENED.

AS the period of the Church's greatest spirituality was that of the Class-meeting's greatest power, so a period of spiritual declension in the Church was also marked by the decline of the Class-meeting. A cold and lifeless Church-member has no relish for such a means of grace. The man who has no experience to tell will avoid the place where religious experience is the only theme. "Experience-meetings," says Dr. Summers, "have been held in every age of the Church. There is a yearning for fellowship in the pious bosom; and where there are the instincts of the spiritual life, they will seek and find development." But when the instincts of the spiritual life are lost, this yearning is no longer felt. The carnal mind seeks carnal association, and finds enjoyment in no other. *"Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works; not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as*

the manner of some is; but exhorting one another, and so much the more as ye see the day approaching." The apostle in this language describes the features of a Methodist Class-meeting—"meeting together, watchful oversight of each other, and mutual exhortations"—and urges this means of grace as a safeguard against being hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, and as an encouragement in the discharge of duty. Neglect of Christian fellowship is an unfailing symptom of the loss of Christian zeal. The empty seats at the weekly prayer-meeting are a valid indictment against the absentees. The Class-meeting, as it is more directly a searcher of the heart and a revealer of its tendency, while it will be sought by the spiritually-minded, will more surely be shunned by the backslidden and the backsliding. Coëtaneous with the decline of the Class-meeting there was visible increase of worldliness in the Church and laxity in its discipline. The doctrinal standard was lowered, and the practice of the Church sunk with it. A cloud of witnesses, living and dead, testify to this fact. When the theater, the ball,

and the card-table came in, the Class-meeting went out. When the world filled the thoughts of the people, they could not be expected to meet to talk about religion. As the Class-meeting was the normal outgrowth of revived New Testament Christianity, so when that revival ebbed it was left stranded on the sands of worldliness. The day of elegant written pulpit essays, quartette choirs, and frigid gentility had come, and that of the Class-meeting was past. A heaven-kindled light was smothered. The voice of a witnessing Church was hushed. But not wholly was the light quenched, or the voice silenced. The holy fire still continued to burn here and there, and living voices, refusing to be gagged, testified of the grace of God, and exhorted, comforted, and edified his people. The Class-meeting did not die. It never will die. But it has had a long sickness, and has suffered at the hands of its friends as well as its enemies.

STEREOTYPED.

IF you inclose a living man in a plaster-of-Paris mold, he will die unless speedily released. The Class-meeting was treated somewhat in this way. While the polity of Methodism was subjected to many modifications, and its pulpit likewise showed adaptability to the changed conditions of society, the Class-meeting remained stationary. It ceased to develop, and it began to decline. But its roots were fixed too deep in Bible-teaching and in the instincts of human nature for it to perish easily. Had this not been so, nothing could have saved it amid the perils and shocks it has encountered. Its branches have been torn by the storms, its trunk scathed, but the tree still stands, and is putting forth the tender twigs of a new growth, and we shall again have bud, and bloom, and fruit. God give the Church faithful husbandmen, and send the sunshine and the shower!

As something more than a mere hortatory gift was demanded of the pulpit, so something more was needed in the Class-meeting. The time had come when the leader must lead, and feed the *thought* of his Class. Not a word have I to say against enthusiasm. Without it the Church is repellent in its coldness and contemptible in its weakness. Not a word have I to say against the emotional element in religion. The now prevalent tendency to underrate it, to sneer at it, and to banish it from the religious life altogether, is a symptom of evil and a sign of danger threatening all that is most precious in Christianity. Take this away, and what would be left would be a body without a soul, light without heat. Religion without feeling is barren and fruitless; but a religion all feeling is fanaticism. Mere intellectualism freezes and starves, and the human soul never fails to turn from it to seek food and warmth wherever they are to be found. But of all tiresome things to human nature a tautologous emotionality, unrelieved and unredeemed by fresh and living thought, is the most intolerable. The preacher whose shal-

low but honest tears and melting voice could move a new audience for a sermon or so, is met by empty pews after the people have found out that there is nothing back of his lungs and lachrymal glands. The Class-leader whose zeal is not according to knowledge, whose sole gift is that of vague and loud exhortation, is just as sure to lose his hold upon his Class. The fervor born of a blazing revival is a good thing, but if it do not associate itself with study of the word of God, and the book of human nature, it is a meager endowment for one to whom is intrusted the nurture of souls in this age of the world. In many places it was not the Class-meeting, but the Class-leader, who broke down. He broke down because he became a fossil when a living, growing man was needed. A chilling frost of carnal-mindedness stunted the growth of this tree of God's own planting, and the shortcomings of the keepers of the vineyard enhanced the damage.

NON-ADAPTATIONS.

DISREGARD of the law of temperamental and spiritual affinities helped to cripple the Class-meeting. The division of the people into classes was too often an arbitrary matter. Their preferences were not consulted. Souls that would have prospered under the guidance of one leader were repelled and discouraged by another.

“I will not attend Class-meeting any longer unless I can join another Class,” said a lady in Savannah. “They have put me in my husband’s Class, and he whips all the Class over my shoulders. I won’t stand it.”

She was right. That husband and wife were both good people, but there were special peculiarities of disposition in each that made it wiser for them to be in different classes. He was a good Class-leader for other ladies, but not for his wife.

A man of stern and unsympathetic nature is not suited to the office of Class-leader at

all. But to put a man of this sort in charge of a Class of young persons is a special folly. This was often done, and the result was to repel the young disciple from a needed means of grace.

A timid, sensitive lady, who had recently joined the Church, was induced to attend Brother J——'s Class after preaching on Sunday morning. Not having been reared a Methodist, it was her first attendance upon a Class-meeting. Brother J—— was a good man, but stern-looking, with heavy, frowning eyebrows, and a strong, harsh voice. Fixing his gaze upon her, as she sat half-wondering, half-scared, he thundered the question—

“Sister, *do you ever pray?*”

“Yes, sir! yes, sir!” she exclaimed in a panic, half springing from her seat.

“I will never go to another Class-meeting,” she said to her pastor the next day; “I was never more frightened in my life.”

The pastor explained, wisely put her into another Class with a different sort of a leader, where she throve, was happy, and became an ardent lover of the Class-meeting.

At the seat of one of our best colleges, after a revival in which a large number of the more advanced students were taken into the Church, the young converts were put into a Class, and a leader appointed to take charge of them. He was a well-meaning man, but he was very weak in his syntax—the very point at which a lot of young Freshmen and Sophomores are naturally inclined to be most critical. That arrangement broke down, of course, and another—not a better Christian, but a better grammarian—took the leadership, and all went well.

In the same town, for the accommodation of the country members, a Class-meeting was held after the morning service. A college professor—a bookish, pedantic, abstracted young man—was appointed to lead it. He made those plain old Methodists stare with wonder while he talked of spiritual things “objective” and “subjective,” and the development of this and that faculty of the soul according to psychological laws. There were neither “Amens” nor shouts in that Class-meeting. But when a brother, who had good common sense, a fervent spirit,

a ready utterance, and the gift of song, was put in charge of the Class, their harps were taken from the willows, and great was the joy. That Class prospered thenceforward.

A Class composed mainly of the most stirring and successful business men of the town was put in charge of an amiable, shiftless, voluble brother, who was always in debt, and who owed most of the brethren committed to his spiritual oversight. The good brother did not seem to be at all abashed in the presence of his creditors—he had by long practice become used to it, and almost thought that to be in debt was the normal state of a godly man—but it was evident that *they* discounted *him*. They found it difficult to believe that a brother who was so slipshod in temporal matters could be a safe guide in spiritual ones. The pastor found it necessary to make a change in the leadership of that Class.

These cases illustrate my point. As in the pastorate, so in the Class-leadership, or sub-pastorate—regard must be had to mutual adaptation.

ONE OF THEM.

HE was a good man; but his goodness was mostly of a negative sort. He did not swear, steal, lie, or break the Sabbath. He did not quarrel, fight, nor slander his neighbors. He did not drink whisky, dance, play cards, or go to the theater. The circus even was eschewed by him. So he was such an inoffensive sort of man that he was appointed Class-leader. There was nothing positive about him. He had imitation enough to sink into a rut, but not energy enough ever to get out again. He prayed the same prayer every week at the opening of the meeting. The same "experience" was told by him until every member of the Class knew it by heart. Beginning with the day when God for Christ's sake spoke peace to his soul twenty years before, and ending with the stereotyped expression of a hope that he would outride the storm and enter the haven of everlasting rest, he went over and over

the same ground until it ceased to make any impression except one of weariness. With his eyes closed, and his face elongated, he went from one to another, asking the same questions: "Brother, tell us the state of your never-dying soul." "Sister, tell how the Lord has dealt with you, and what are your prospects for heaven and eternal glory."

The answers were, of course, as vague as the questions. There was nothing to hang any thing on. So they, one after another, would say they had many troubles, and trials, and tribulations, and temptations, but they hoped to hold on and get to the kingdom at last.

The exhortation by the leader that followed each talk was the crowning stupidity of his Class-meeting service. It had two faults: it was rambling and nearly meaningless, and it never changed. There was no instruction in it, nothing that showed the least spiritual insight or vigor of thought, but the unvarying expression of a few good wishes or mechanical prayers that the brother or sister might prove faithful until death, and then be crowned, amid songs and shout.

ings, on the other side of Jordan. Then a long prayer, and then dismissal.

The younger members of the Class began to drop off one by one. Then the others began to be missed. At last only three or four old people remained, and they showed by their countenances that they endured rather than enjoyed the Class-meeting. "It is not like old times," they sighed. "The Church is cold and dead. Holy Ghost religion has gone out of date, and the days are evil." They suffered and endured, and in the simplicity of their kind hearts did not seem to know what was the matter. The Class had been starved to death. The old soup-bones had been boiled over again and again, until there was no more nutriment in them.

ANOTHER.

HE, too, was a good man. Some thought him painfully good. He was not good company out of the Class-meeting. In it he was an affliction. His face wore a distressed look. His voice was distressful in its tone. His words were the words of a man who was distressed at every thing and everybody. It was this peculiarity that caused him to be made Class-leader. He expressed so much dissatisfaction with the way in which others spoke and acted, that the young pastor took it for granted that he was the man to get matters right, and keep them so. It was thought that so severe a critic would be nearly faultless, and was the proper censor and exemplar for his brethren. And it could not be denied that he magnified his office as a censor. His groans were unceasing, his complaints indiscriminate. In opening the Class-meeting, he would read a psalm or a prophecy describing the desolations of Zion ;

the hymn would be on the same line; the prayer a confession that all was wrong, and that there was no hope. His own experience was one of warfare without victory, of many trials, but no triumphs. To him the Christian life was all a vale of tears with no Pisgah summits, a weary desert with no shading palms or cooling springs. He saw the dark side of all things. He emitted gloom. To him life was a dark and thorny path, religion all burden-bearing, endurance, and persecution, and Christian fellowship the opportunity to exchange complaints and censures. He was a good man of his type, but his type was not that suited to the Class-leadership.

A young convert, coming into his Class in the glow of his first love, caught a chill that was almost deadly. Happy in the new life into which he had been born, he was full of grateful joy and exultant hope. When he had told the story with swelling bosom and streaming eyes, the Class-leader sighed a long-drawn sigh, groaned, and said: "Ah, my young brother, all seems fair and bright to you now, but let me warn you of your deceitful heart, and of a tempting devil, and

a sinful world. The Church is cold and backslidden, and there are few that will be saved.' This was meant well, for he was a good man, and candor and faithfulness are commendable. But sympathy and encouragement were specially called for in such a case. These were not in his nature, and perhaps he was not to blame. Organic austerity and gloom are rarely cured this side the grave. But a man who can do nothing but sigh, and groan, and forebode disaster, is not fit for a leader in the army of the Lord.

The Class scattered under this *régime*. The young people especially—the very class of persons most needing the benefits of the Class-meeting—were driven away. Who could blame them for shunning a place so uninviting? Youth, and health, and happiness, are proper companions of religion, but not the religion of moroseness and gloom. The blessed companionship of Jesus never checked the beating pulse of lawful pleasure, or threw a shadow upon the path of innocence!

That this unhappy Class-leader killed his

Class was not the worst of it. He helped to kill the budding spiritual life in young hearts. He made them think that the Church, instead of being the house of God in which his family find shelter, companionship, comfort, and all holy delights, was a funeral vault in which were to be buried all that was bright and joyous in life. As a private member of the Church he would have been simply disagreeable to a small circle, but as a Class-leader he was a blight and a burden, a lachrymose libel upon the religion which is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

This man had a genius for suggesting doubt and insinuating distrust. His pastor was not sufficiently pugnacious and aggressive to suit him; and he did not fail to bewail a man-fearing ministry, and to wish for one who would cry aloud and spare not. He would tell of the rougher incidents in the ministry of Lorenzo Dow, Peter Cartwright, and other preachers of that type, and would end by saying, dolefully, "We have no such preachers now. Our ministers all prophesy smooth things, and allow the Church to go to ruin."

It has already been repeated that he was a good man; and so he was, though not of the highest or most attractive type of goodness. His native bias led him to form a false ideal of Christian character and service, and it is the fatal necessity of such natures that they see every thing through the darkening medium of their own morbidness. There is no honey for them in the sweetest flowers that bloom in the garden of God. To put such a man into the Class-leadership is to chill and blight the souls they should warm and nurture.

AND YET ANOTHER.

HE was also a good man, but he was not wise in all things. As a Class-leader, his fault was a fatal fluency. He did not lead the Class so much as make orations to it. His voice was loud, and his words were many, but his ideas moved within a very small circle. In that circle they went round and round with amazing continuance. He had studied divinity after a sort, and could string a long homily on the faintest thread. He was prolixity itself. He was a master of the drearily-didactic style of speech. The sound of his own voice had a wonderful charm for him. By the time he had finished his "opening remarks" it was time to close the meeting. But it did not so appear to him. He was wound up, and had to run down in the usual way. His bottled eloquence must be discharged, and the unhappy members of the Class must stand it. A simple-hearted old sister, in response to an

inquiry, says she meets with many trials and troubles, but is still trying to put her trust in the Saviour. With this text he pitches his big voice in a high key, and pours forth an avalanche of magniloquent platitudes on the general subject of affliction and trial. As he proceeds, he gains momentum—his voice, we mean, not his thoughts, for there is no distinct or connected thought in all the long and rumbling volley of sounds.

A thoughtful and quiet brother speaks of mental perplexities that have troubled him, and says he has come to the Class-meeting hoping to find light. The leader, having gotten breath, again pitches that huge voice, and takes half an hour in saying nothing particular—the hazier the language the louder the tone—until the air is dense with mental darkness, and rent with meaningless vociferation. He turns red in the face, perspires, claps his hands, and ends with a doxology that it would be irreverent to quote in such a connection.

And so he proceeds from week to week. The Class-meetings are protracted beyond all reasonable limits, and even then nothing

is done in the way of instructing, comforting, or edifying the members, who, feeling bored, and realizing that they are not fed, drop off, one by one, until the leader is left almost alone—almost alone, but not quite. It is hard to kill a Class-meeting. The hunger of the soul prompts some to come, though disappointed again and again. Honest and simple-minded Christians try to think that the fault is in themselves instead of the leader, and, like thirsty cattle in a drought, they keep going to the stream after the water is all dried up. Yes, it is hard to kill a Class-meeting that has once had life. Its dying struggles are protracted and painful to behold. Rooted in the instincts and necessities of struggling human souls, its tenacity of life under adverse conditions is a proof of its legitimacy as a means of grace, and of its claim to better treatment at the hands of its friends.

TYPES.

THE leader of the "Young Men's Class" in a city Church was a lawyer about thirty-five years old, a graduate of one of the oldest and best colleges, and the possessor of a large fortune by inheritance. Tall, graceful in movement, with intensely bright dark eyes, features in which strength and delicacy were blended, heavy black hair above a pale brow, he looked like a man of distinction in any company. His voice was deep and mellow, and had the magnetic quality that belonged to the whole man. Young as he was, he had suffered. He had naturally strong passions, and the traces of internal conflicts as well as sorrow were in his face. He was an earnest student of the Bible, and read it daily in the original Greek, and often on his knees. There were about thirty young men in his Class, and their regard for him was at once respectful and tender. They were all drawn very close to him in intimate

personal fellowship, though the shadow of sorrow that rested on him repressed the exhibition of the jollity that usually marks the intercourse of young men who are intimately friendly. In leading the Class, his fervor kindled a glow in every heart. His opening prayer seemed to bring God so near that conventionalities were forgotten by the most timid in an overpowering sense of divine realities. Two opposite peculiarities showed themselves in his Class-leadership. The martial element in his nature and the sympathetic were equally quick to flash forth on occasion. In exhorting a young soldier of the cross, his eye would kindle and his voice ring out like the shout of a captain in battle. On Zion's walls are now standing more than one faithful watchman who caught the inspiration of a high Christian enthusiasm from this consecrated Class-leader. His instinct for the recognition of sorrow, and his sympathy with it, were also notable. His intuition in this line was marvelous. His heart-strings had been tuned to grief, and they vibrated responsively to its presence in others. His ear was quick to detect "the

sighing of broken reeds,' and he was tenderly skillful in applying the strong consolation. One night a strange young man appeared for the first time in his Class. He was in the midst of a severe struggle, and in the shadow of a bitter sorrow, and, when called on, spoke briefly as he felt. The leader's few words in response thrilled him with an intense conviction that God was in it all, and that he had reached a solemn crisis, a pivotal point, in his life. The Class-leader had read his heart, and he felt it. At the close of the Class-meeting the young man, having left the church and started to his hotel, had gone but a few steps when an arm was thrust into his, and a voice said—

“If you will allow me, I will go home with you.”

It was the Class-leader. He stayed with the young stranger until beyond midnight, and when they parted they were Christian friends—friends for eternity.

In the same city was another Class-leader, a merchant of middle age, a sunny-faced, auburn-haired man, with large blue eyes, and a smile that made his countenance fairly

lighten all over. His gift was a sweet voice in song. He knew all the best hymns by heart, and all the good tunes. He sang encouragement, comfort, advice, reproof, and instruction, into his Class. He had a stanza ready for every case. It is wonderful how full our Wesleyan hymnology is of matter suited to such use. It is almost a perfect armory for the equipment of a Class-leader of this type. If a brother expressed despondency or fearfulness, this tuneful leader would strike up, "Am I a soldier of the cross," to an air with a martial ring. Did another confess to weariness under life's heavy burdens, he would sing, "There is rest for the weary," so sweetly that the burdened soul was soothed into a blessed tranquillity. When a member of the Class met with it for the last time before removing to some other place, and took leave of his classmates with a melting heart and broken voice, the leader would strike up, "When shall we all meet again?" and by the time he had reached the last verse—

When our task of life is said,
When its wasted lamps are dead,
Where immortal spirits reign,
There we all shall meet again—

there was an impression and a memory sacred for all coming life. The echo of that voice has brought a melody from the old days into the sadness and discord of the scattered members of this Class in the long years that have followed with their conflicts and griefs. This singer was a successful Class-leader.

In another city, many hundreds of miles away, was a Class-leader who could not for the life of him sing a single tune, but whose gift was an unlimited command of Bible language, and singular felicity in its application. His quiver was full of these arrows, and he had one always ready. He was a man of large frame, with a face expressive of unusual solemnity, and a voice to correspond. He had also another gift, and that was tears. His own life of sorrow kept that fount stirred. He had buried all his children, one by one, and other griefs had left their impress upon his soul. A leading merchant in his Class spoke of the absorbing nature of his business, complaining that it left him but little time or strength for religion. Looking earnestly upon him, the old Class-leader,

the tears dropping from his eyes as he spoke, said to the busy man—

“How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of heaven!”

And then, after a short pause, he added, with redoubled solemnity—

“What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”

He said no more to him, passing on to another member of the Class; but this was enough. That hurried merchant got the word he needed, and he felt that God had spoken to him through his faithful Class-leader. This tearful, Bible-quoting old man was a successful Class-leader.

Among the male members of a country Church, in one of the older Conferences, there was no one who could take charge of a class of women. The circuit-preacher asked a sister to assume the duties of Class-leader. After some hesitation she consented to do so. They met weekly, on Thursdays, at the old meeting-house among the oaks. They came—some in their carriages, some on horseback, and two or three, who lived in sight, on foot. They read the Scriptures, sung, prayed, told

one by one what God was doing for them and in them by the power of an indwelling Christ, and rejoiced and wept together. The leader was womanly, tender, and with no element of masculinity in her nature; but she was fervent, magnetic, full of energy, and a sweet singer. The Class prospered, and the neighborhood was filled with the fragrance of its blessed influence. All but one of these devout women have passed to the skies, but the tradition of their holiness and zeal still remains, and lingers like a halo on the old red hills where they are buried. It is worthy of consideration whether women as Class-leaders for women may not be called into service with the happiest results.

WHAT FORM?

ORIGINALLY, the number in a single Class was fixed at twelve. This was as many as one leader could properly care for under the old method of conducting the Class. He was expected to have a sort of sub-pastoral oversight of them during the week, and to catechise each one separately at each meeting concerning the state of his soul. The methodical mind of John Wesley is reflected in this arrangement. Every man must have his place, and fill it. He wanted, not a mob, but an army of disciplined believers. All at work, and all the time at it, was his motto. Methodism in that day was as compact as a Spartan phalanx. It was organized and disciplined. It gained victories, and held its conquests. This form of organization suited the conditions then existing. The results proved it. New Testament Christianity never had a brighter day, or wielded greater power, than at this time, when the

militant Methodists were thus banded together. In the compact populations of England and in the cities of the United States this arrangement worked without difficulty or friction. But practical modifications were necessitated in other localities. The number of persons in a Class was often much greater, because of the lack of suitable leaders and other causes. It often happened that the only time at which the Church-members in country charges could be gotten together was on Sunday after preaching. After a short, warm sermon, the benediction was pronounced, the outsiders dispersed, the doors were closed, and scores of devout men and women told what the Lord had done for their souls, amid snatches of holy song, tears, and shouts, and hallelujahs. What memories cluster around these sacred occasions! On these tides of feeling young converts were swept out to sea, lost their timidity, and lifted their grateful voices in testimony to the power of Jesus to save from sin, and many a future captain of the Lord's host here first drew the sword of the Spirit. Many a doubting believer in the blaze of the Class

meeting fervor saw the light which never grew dim. Many an aged saint received a fresh baptism from on high, and caught a brighter vision of the more excellent glory. The heart of the whole Church was there, and its mighty pulsations thrilled every member. The Class-meeting harrows in the seed sown in a gospel sermon, and quickens its germination and growth.

Let this whole matter be regulated by the convenience of the parties involved, and by common sense. The greater the number of Class-leaders the better. The sub-division of the work makes it more effective. The office of a Class-leader is specially calculated to develop the best elements of the Christian character in the leader himself. It tends to make him a man of prayer, a student of the Bible and of human nature, ready in speech, and growingly alive to the worth of souls. There are in the Methodist Church thousands of men whose lives would blossom into new spiritual life, and be enriched with the fruits of enlarged usefulness, if the holy duties of the blessed work of the Class-leadership were laid upon them. In the

revival of the Class-meeting, which has begun, and will not stop, these men will be called upon to take this office and work. As they love the Lord Jesus Christ, as they love his Church, as they love their fellow-beings, as they love their own souls, let them not turn a deaf ear to that call!

Where, from any cause, the services of a sufficient number of suitable men cannot be secured, let the Classes be larger. There is no necessity that all should speak at every meeting. Good listeners and good singers are very useful in a Class-meeting service. A sympathetic, prayerful hearer, is a stimulus to all who talk. You may be a listener at one meeting, and a speaker at the next. A hundred persons could be edified by a single leader who combined sound sense, tact, and energy, in his method of conducting the Class-meeting.

But the difficulty of finding good Class-leaders will disappear whenever the Church puts her heart into this work. The great armies that lately shook this nation by their tread were officered from their own ranks. Soldiers had to be tried to find out whether

they were fit for command. Success was the test. So with the Church. We have the men for Class-leaders. Put them into the work. Those who fit it will develop the qualities needed. If any fail on trial, the pastor can choose others in their stead. Once get them to think about it, and our best men will covet this work—a work only second to the regular pastorate as a field for doing good, and for self-culture in the life of God, and which is at the same time not incompatible with the successful pursuit of any legitimate secular calling. Let the lawyer and jurist bring his trained and sharpened intellect into the service of God and man in the Class-meeting; let the physician, like another beloved Luke, make his calling doubly sacred by ministering to the souls as well as the bodies of his fellow-beings; let the mechanic, whose genius rears the noble edifices that adorn our cities, also aid in building the living temples of human souls in which dwells the Holy Ghost; let the farmer be also a laborer in this spiritual harvest-field, where fruits of holiness are garnered for eternity; let the merchant engage in this

merchandise, which is more precious than gold or silver; let the statesman bring his massive brain into a service where more than empires are at stake. The Head of the Church calls for its best men for this blessed work. Let no one refuse.

THE WOMAN'S MEETING AT McKENDREE.

FEELING the need of some special service in which their Christian sympathies could have free expression, and their communion with each other be more satisfactory, and their aspirations for a fuller knowledge of God and a deeper spirituality be nourished, some ladies connected with McKendree Methodist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, agreed to meet once a week to carry out these desires. It was announced simply as "The Woman's Meeting," and no regular programme of exercises was at first indicated. A few elect ladies attended the service from week to week. Their interest in the exercises steadily increased, and their growth in knowledge and in grace was apparent. The exercises, though varying at their option, finally settled into something like this programme: 1. A hymn. 2. A prayer. 3. Reading the Scripture. 4. The discussion

of a Bible topic (*previously announced*) with relation to Christian experience. The meeting increased in numbers and in interest, until what was begun under a warm Christian impulse as an experiment became one of the permanent institutions of that large and powerful Society. It is dearly cherished by the devout women who enjoy its benefits, and they will not be likely to let it die, at least for this generation.

Is there not a hint here for us? Have we not here a fresh proof of the fact that earnest Christianity will express its desires and needs in some such way?

This service has the essential characteristics of the Class-meeting — rather, perhaps, we should say the one essential of a Methodist Class-meeting—namely, the nurture of the Christian life. The Bible topic is a new feature. Is not this a new element that will give new life and enhanced value to the Class-meeting in many places? The study of practical Bible truth, in its relation to the ever-varying exigencies of Christian experience, furnishes the element of thoughtfulness which was felt by many to be lacking in the

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Class-meeting of the past. The topic for the week, embodied often in a single verse of Scripture, is a golden thread upon which to hang the religious meditations of the intervening period. It is astonishing to find how a subject, thus held in the mind, will grow; running so long in the same direction, the thought cuts a deep channel. Thus the thoughtful, prayerful believer reaches the very heart of things. Thus the devout soul, meditating upon heavenly truth, meets sweet surprises by the discovery of deeper meanings and brighter vistas opening before his advancing feet. Infinite variety and perennial freshness are thus imparted to the Christian life. As the source of religious thought is inexhaustible, and the appetite for it never cloy, but increases the more it is fed, here we find that which will make every true believer's experience as fresh as the dew of morning, and as unfailing as the river of God, which is full of water.

But not only is the light of the Bible thus thrown upon the path of daily Christian experience, but the light of experience is reflected back upon the Bible. Who does not

know this to be so? The best Bible-class is a Class-meeting where devout and thoughtful men and women interpret the word of God by the light of their own experiences. The deepest truths of the Bible can be learned only in this way. The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him. He that will do his will shall know of the doctrine. The light flashes back and forth from the open Bible and the loving heart. This feature has been used with happy effect by the writer of these chapters, who is himself a Class-leader, happy in his work, and diligently seeking to find the best methods. The Bible Class-meeting is the very agency by which every Christian can surely grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not Bible-class meetings, but Bible Class-meetings. The placing of the hyphen marks the difference.

The Class-meeting of the future will probably take something of this form. But not everywhere, or necessarily. Leave it free to adapt itself to the varying conditions of human society, always keeping it clearly in mind that its prime object is the nurture and

development of the Christian life by the interchange of Christian thought and Christian experience. Keeping this object ever in view, put no strait-jacket upon the Class-meeting. Much can be left to be determined by the individuality of different leaders, the peculiar wants of different Societies, and the wise discretion of the pastors of the Churches.

YOU CAN IF YOU WILL.

IT has already been said that the Class-meeting cannot be killed, because it has its roots in the Bible and in the human soul. Not only among Methodists, but among all Christians, when they are alive to God, and earnest in the Christian life, some means of grace that has the essential characteristics of a Class-meeting will develop itself. The "experience-meetings," "inquiry-meetings," "conference-meetings," "Bible-meetings," and "promise-and-praise meetings" of other Churches, are the expression of a felt want, and a recognition of the scriptural obligation that binds Christians to exhort, comfort, and edify one another. In times of special religious interest, this form of Christian devotion and fellowship is sure to manifest itself, in accordance with the law already alluded to, that the revival of the apostolic spirit and aggressive energy in the Church will bring with it the revival of apostolic usage

and methods. The question before us, then, is not whether the Class-meeting shall be established, for it already exists wherever Methodism has organized existence. It is not whether the Class-meeting shall be resuscitated, for there has been no suspension of its life. But it is, By what means shall it be recovered from its decline, and restored to its former vitality and power?

The answer to this question has already in part been given indirectly in stating the causes that led to the decline of the Class-meeting. But the first thing to be done, if we would revive the Class-meeting, is to resolve to do it. God will not withhold his blessing now from what he once blessed so richly. His blessing would insure success to a proper effort. His own glory in the salvation of men and the progress of the gospel is involved in this holy enterprise. His Church is languishing for the lack of this means of grace. Souls are perishing for lack of the nurture which it would furnish. This great barrier removed, the world comes in upon the Church like a flood. This holy fire quenched, the lambs of Christ's flock freeze

to death in the cold atmosphere of worldliness into which they are plunged. The multitudes are rushing into the follies of infidelity on the one hand, and the most groveling superstitions on the other, while the great body of Christ's disciples are voiceless. May God awaken us all!

The pastors should lead. They are the overseers of the flock of Christ. The care of souls is their one work. What subject is more worthy of their thoughts and prayers than this? In what way could they more effectually serve the Church than by giving themselves earnestly to the consideration of the means by which the spiritual life of its members shall be guarded, guided, and built up? There are no difficulties in the way of the revival of the Class-meeting that would not yield before the determined purpose and steady effort of the pastors of our Churches. The writer of these chapters has never had a pastoral charge without a Class-meeting. When the pastor resolves that he *will* have this means of grace for his people, the battle is already half won.

“When do you hold your Class-meeting?”

asked a preacher who had just arrived in a California mining-town in the early days.

"Class-meeting! We have none. This is California, and you must not think you are in Georgia."

"What! a Methodist Church without a Class-meeting? That will not do."

The brother smiled incredulously, and said no more.

On the next Sunday the young preacher, at the close of the morning service, made the following announcement:

"I am surprised and grieved to learn that heretofore you have had no Class-meeting service in this Church. We must do better than that, my brethren. A Methodist Church without a Class-meeting lacks a most important means of grace, a feature peculiar to us as a people, and one which God hath wonderfully blessed. On Thursday evening you will please meet in the church for the purpose of organizing a Class-meeting. The service will begin at half-past seven o'clock. Please be punctual to the time, and as our membership is small at best, I hope every one will make it a point to attend."

Thursday evening came. The young preacher lighted the lamps in the church, arranged the little table in the "altar," selected a chapter and a hymn for use in the opening, and waited for the brethren and sisters, his wife sitting on one of the pews facing him. There they sat in silence, and waited. The light was dim, the stillness profound, and the minutes flew by. At length it was eight o'clock, and nobody had come.

"They seem to be late getting here," said the young preacher, rather solemnly.

"Yes, they are late," answered his wife.

Still they sat and waited, gazing seriously at each other in the dim light, and the minutes flew by. Half-past eight came, and nobody had come.

"They seem to be *very* late in coming," observed the preacher.

"Yes, they are very late," answered his wife.

And still they sat and gazed at one another, and waited, and the light seemed to be dimmer. Nine o'clock came, nobody had come, and for the first time the thought entered the young preacher's mind that nobody

would come. The idea took him aback for a moment, but his heart was set on having a Class-meeting; he was absorbed with that one feeling. So he rose and addressed his wife—

“We have met to hold a Class-meeting; and, though nobody else has come, we need not be disappointed. It may look like a mere form for me to interrogate you concerning your spiritual experience, but ——”

Here the affair seemed to strike the lady in a ludicrous way, and she began to shake with suppressed laughter, perceiving which the young preacher said, sternly—

“Sarah, *we are holding a Class-meeting!*”

This somehow made matters worse. She almost laughed outright. Once more he said, more sternly than before—

“Do you remember where you are, and what we are here for? *We are holding a Class-meeting!* Let us pray,” he added, and down they kneeled.

Full of his subject, the young preacher had “liberty” in that prayer, and when they rose from their knees his wife, who was a truly religious woman, and a good Methodist,

was fully sobered. The young preacher, now thoroughly aroused, stood upon his feet, told his experience, and exhorted with great energy, oblivious of every thing except that he was holding a Class-meeting, and having a good time. Dismissing in due form, the meeting ended.

Next Sunday, at the close of the morning service, he said—

“We had a good Class-meeting last Thursday evening. The attendance was not large, but the exercises were very interesting and profitable. We will meet again next Thursday evening, at half-past seven o’clock.”

That settled the matter. The ice was broken. It was demonstrated that a Class-meeting could be held even in the mines of California. At the next meeting a nice little company of Methodists were present, and the exercises were full of interest, and the little band left the house with glowing hearts and renewed strength. Thenceforth there was no difficulty about the Class-meeting. It grew in every good sense of the word. A canny Scotchman, who had been trained under Bishop Keener in the good old

days, was made Class-leader. He was converted by reading "John Nelson's Journal," and his religion was of Nelson's fervent and fearless type. From that Class two young men went forth as preachers in the Pacific Conference, one of whom, after a short but earnest and fruitful ministry, finished his course with joy, and the other is still a watchman on Zion's walls, a man of great usefulness, honored and loved by his brethren.

The point of this personal narrative is that every Methodist pastor can have a Class-meeting if he will.

THE YOUNG PEOPLE.

AS matters now stand, a large proportion of young persons, on joining the Church, have nearly every thing to learn with regard to its forms, usages, and activities. Some come from irreligious families in which they have had no opportunity to learn any thing of religious matters. Even the children of religious parents often exhibit astonishing ignorance of these things. The home influence and instruction are too mild to leave any strong and lasting impressions upon their minds. They are never taught what are the doctrines, government, and history of their Church. They never read a chapter of its Book of Discipline. They have heard but little religious conversation, and that little has been of a conventional and fragmentary nature. They have had little or no knowledge of religion, except that which they have heard from the pulpit, or absorbed by casual contact with religious people and

religious literature. Confined to the routine of attendance on Sunday-preaching, where they hear two sermons, and the weekly prayer-meeting, where they hear a chapter read from the Bible, and listen to two or three prayers by their seniors, what development of spiritual gifts or increase of spiritual life can be expected? They take their places with the dumb and half-alive throngs whose names swell the census of Church-members, but who are scarcely more felt in the way of Christian influence than so many men of straw. The glow of their first love cools. The current of their religious life ceases to flow, and becomes a dead sea without a ripple of fresh spiritual impulse, or aspiration, or energy. What they want is the Class-meeting. There they will find expression and enlargement of their religious thought. There they will enjoy the inestimable advantage to be derived from the wise counsels and warm sympathies of holy men and women who have studied heavenly things in the light of the Bible and in the school of experience. There they learn the language of Zion, and in the freedom of that sacred cir-

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cle they are trained for service in all the devotional exercises in which the followers of Jesus testify for him and work for the salvation of souls. A great company of living witnesses, devout men and women, who began their Christian courses before the Class-meeting waned, would testify that to it more than to any and all other means of grace they are indebted for the influence that gave stability, practical direction, vigor, and joy to their lives. In answer to direct inquiry, the writer has heard this testimony from so many of the strong men and holy women of the generation now passing off the stage, that he cannot doubt the truth of the sweeping statement made in the foregoing sentence.

Shall young persons be put into separate Classes, or mingled with older persons? It would not be wise to answer hastily or dogmatically. The obvious benefits to be derived by young persons from contact with the ripe judgment and varied experience of older ones have already been alluded to. On the other hand, there is a freedom and ease among young Christian friends that they

rarely feel in the presence of gray hairs. At Santa Rosa, California, the pastor of the Church formed a "Young People's Class," which met on Saturday afternoon. The average number attending was twenty—at times it was considerably larger. These young people were of both sexes, ranging from twenty-five down to about fourteen years of age. A large part of them were young converts, the fruit of a revival that will be remembered, by some of them, at least, through time and eternity. This Class-meeting had the happiest effect upon them all. It made a Christian atmosphere warm with the glow of young life, and bright with the holy light of Christian friendship. If these pages should meet the eye of any one of that band, now scattered over the world, they will read these lines with swelling hearts, and perchance with misty eyes. They will never forget their Saturday Class-meeting. Among the members of this Class there was a notable religious development. Not only in the gift of utterance, not only in readiness in song and fluency and fervency in prayer, but in earnest thought and

fruitful reflection on religious topics, did these young Christians show rapid and steady progress. And it was joyfully recognized on all sides that their reflex influence upon the whole Church was most happily felt in all its worship and in all its activities. A delighted old brother, who attended one of the meetings, said to the leader, "Why, your Young People's Class could run a camp-meeting!" And so they could. They had gained in their Class-meeting the training that qualified them to bear a part in any service for the Church in its regular worship or special aggressive movements upon society. The principle upon which this Class was conducted was, that each member should bring to its weekly meeting his best thought and best experience for the week. Growth in knowledge and in grace were kept before them as the aim of a true Christian life. Bible-texts bearing upon the practical aspects of religion were sometimes suggested by the leader as threads upon which to hang the meditations of the ensuing week. At other times each member was requested to bring a verse of Scripture relating to some great fact or doc-

trine of revelation. But religious experience was always the goal to which all the exercises were directed, and it was delightful to see how absolutely free from stiffness, constraint, or false timidity, were these young Christians in these discussions of divine truth and interchanges of Christian experience. Now and then the leader would invite the presence of Dan. Duncan, a local preacher, whose almost seraphic face, sweet humility, and chastened joyousness of spirit, made him welcome in all circles, and it was very pleasant to see how completely such a man could throw himself into the spirit of the occasion, and how heartily the young disciples welcomed one who walked in the light of the Lord, and whose soul was kept perennially fresh with the influx of the 'life of God. He too was a Class-leader, and he was one who magnified his office, and loved the Class-meeting as the very gate of heaven

THIRTY THOUSAND CLASS-LEADERS.

THERE are about thirty thousand Methodist preachers in the United States. There ought to be at least as many Class-leaders. Think of it! Thirty thousand men in an office most favorable to their own spiritual development. Thirty thousand men in training for the highest usefulness. Thirty thousand men devoted specially to religious self-culture and the study and nurture of the religious life in others. What could not such a body of men do under God? Who does not want to see the day when all this goodly company of Class-leaders shall be at work? Who would be willing to renounce the hope of such a consummation? Where is the Methodist layman who would not feel honored and blessed in being one of these thirty thousand?

Thirty thousand men engaged in the study of spiritual phenomena, as exhibited in the

development of the religious life of the members of their Classes, would be just so many men at school acquiring the knowledge that would make them wise to win souls. In the Class-meeting there is opportunity for observation of this sort not furnished anywhere else. The Class-leader can compare the mental states of the same person in the progressive movement of the religious life. In this the Class-meeting differs from the Love-feast, the prayer-meeting, or even the study of theology. The Class-leader whose interest is quickened by love to his Class, and kept alive by a deep sense of responsibility for their welfare, gets what no books can give—a knowledge of the workings of the human heart in the midst of the actual conflicts and changing conditions of life. Many Class-leaders have gone into the ministry carrying with them preparation for dealing with the practical aspects of the pastoral work that they could have gotten in no other way. At the early age of sixteen John B. McFerrin was made a Class-leader, and threw himself into that work with youthful enthusiasm and characteristic energy. This early expe-

rience affected happily his whole subsequent life. It gave a practical bias to his mind in dealing with religious questions. It made his theology of the concrete order. It developed that readiness and tact in dealing with men for which he has been distinguished. It accustomed him at the very beginning of his long career to bear heavy responsibilities and to carry burdens. It gave to his preaching a directness and spirituality that reflected the spirit of the Class-meeting service. And he is one of many preachers whose best theological study and preparatory training were found in the Class-meeting as it existed fifty years ago. The preachers of the past generation were spiritually wiser because of the Class-meeting. There they obtained a spiritual insight that supplemented their own experiences; and not unfrequently revelations were made to them in the Class-meeting that changed the whole of their after-lives. The Rev. George W. Nolley, of the Virginia Conference, in his early ministry, heard the testimony of a woman in a Class-meeting that gave him new and higher views of the Christian life—views which he

has retained unto this day, and which grew with his spiritual growth, and strengthened with his spiritual strength. Bishop Morris, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and Bishop Marvin, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, were largely indebted to the Class-meeting for the influence that brought them to Jesus and into the Church, and that made their ministry so fruitful of blessing to the world.

Thirty thousand Class-leaders would become the very strongest spiritual support of the pastors. Their office is so distinctly religious that it tends to make theirs the fairest, clearest minds in all temporal discussions and policy in the quarterly meetings and other official bodies. Their work is so allied in character to that of the pastors that they can readily enter into their feelings and plans, and so become their safe advisers and cordial co-workers.

Thirty thousand Class-leaders would furnish the very help needed in the spiritual oversight of a spiritual Church. Mark the expression: the spiritual oversight of a spiritual Church. It suggests the princi-

ple that is the very core of the Class-meeting.

Thirty thousand Class leaders would hold steadily to their Church-allegiance and religious duties a class of persons who, in the change of pastors, necessitated by our wise and apostolic itinerant system, are exposed to the seductions of proselyters and the danger which threatens the sheep in the absence of the shepherd. The Class-meeting gives Methodism the benefits of a settled spiritual oversight combined with an itinerant ministry. These two elements of efficiency were simultaneously developed in the order of the providence of God. What he hath thus joined together, and so signally blessed, let not our blindness and folly put asunder.

Thirty thousand Class-meetings would furnish places where plain men of God could work for the Church without the surrender of temporal engagements, and without any special preparation except a saving faith, good common sense, and a zeal according to knowledge. Can the Church afford to lose the service these men could render? Is she willing to wrap up all this talent in a napkin

and bury it? Not until she is ready to smother out her spiritual life and make ready for her own burial as a dead Church!

Thirty thousand Class-leaders would recruit from their ranks the Christian ministry. Nothing could be better calculated to reveal to a man and to the Church his aptitude for the pastoral work than the Class-leadership. The Class-meeting would be more than ever a school of the prophets. From the Class-leadership would enter the ministerial ranks the very sort of preachers needed for the times—men of intense spirituality, men whose love for souls is a burning passion, men whose knowledge of heavenly things is experimental, men of practical wisdom and aggressive energy.

Thirty thousand Class-leaders, such as will be found if we seek them prayerfully, would arrest the present tendency to formality and worldliness, would rekindle the fires of Holy Ghost religion in tens of thousands of cold hearts, and once more confront a brazen and defiant infidelity with a Christianity conscious of the presence, and armed with the power, of God.

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